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ABSTRACT

Currently all non-exempt television shows are given one of six "age-based" ratings, such as TV-14. The industry also agreed to add "content descriptors" to the age-based ratings in certain instances, letting parents know when some programs contain particular types of content such as violence, sex, or adult language. The ratings are designed to work in conjunction with the V-chip. A study, one of the largest analyses of television content ever conducted, explored how effectively the new TV rating system has been applied during its first year of operation. More than 2600 randomly selected television programs were examined across two television seasons. Key findings suggest that: (1) the age-based ratings for general audience shows (i.e., all except children's programs) are applied in a way that reasonably reflects the content of these shows; (2) however, content descriptors are not being used on the vast majority of general audience shows containing sex, violence, or adult language; and (3) children's programs also contain a significant amount of violence, most of which is indicated by an FV ("fantasy violence") content descriptor. Contains 6 figures of data. (NKA)

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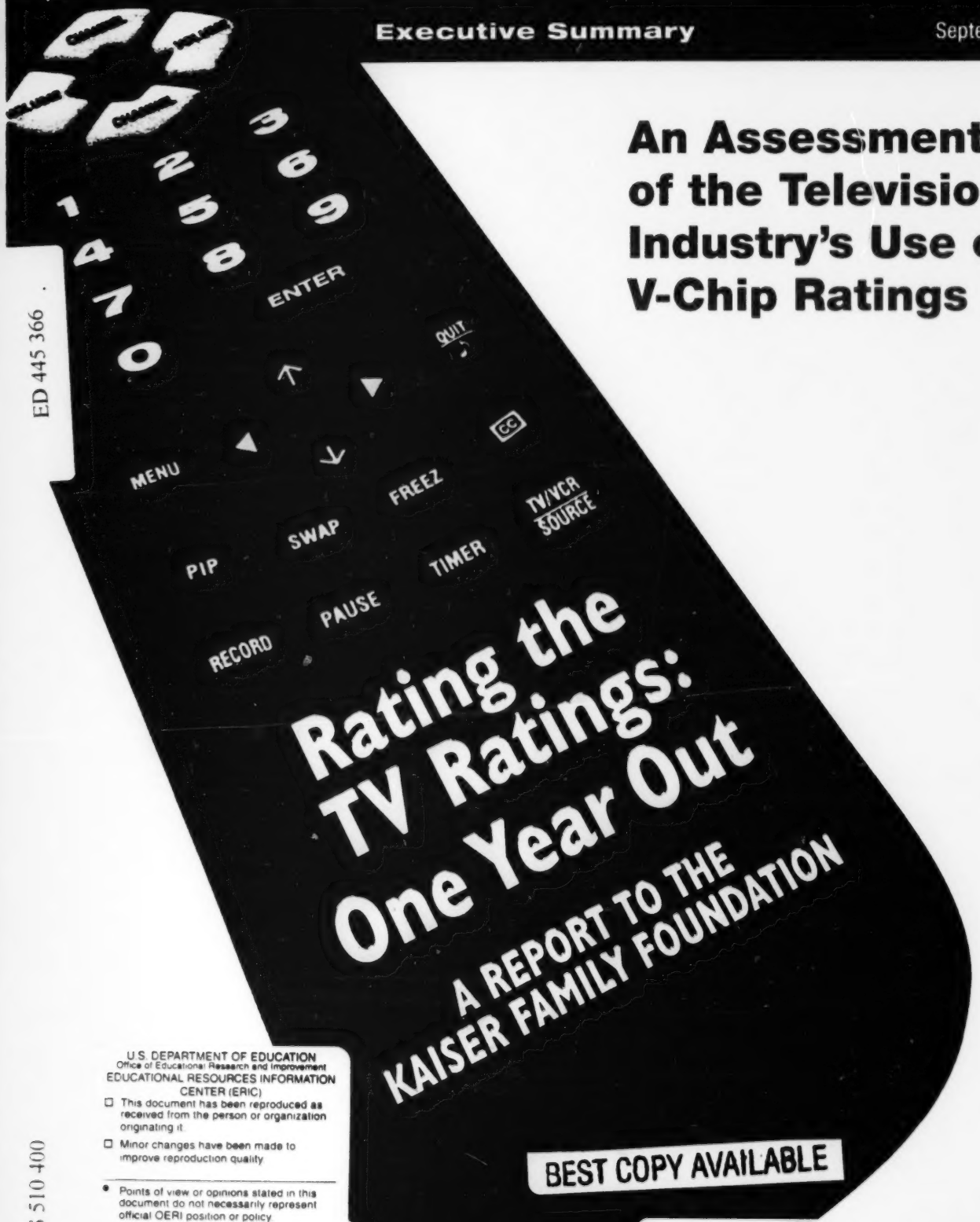

An Assessment of the Television Industry's Use of V-Chip Ratings

Rating the TV Ratings: One Year Out

A REPORT TO THE KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION

ED 445 366

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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THE HENRY J. KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION

Background: The TV Rating System

In October 1997, the television industry began implementing a new system for rating all programs other than news and sports shown on broadcast and cable TV. The rating system was designed to help parents monitor and guide their children's television viewing.

Networks and syndicators rate their own programs, although individual stations have a right to change that rating. All non-exempt shows are given one of six "age-based" ratings, such as TV-14. In addition, after extensive negotiations with parent's and children's organizations, the industry also agreed to add "content descriptors" to the age-based ratings in certain instances, letting parents know when some programs contain particular types of content such as violence, sex, or adult language. NBC has declined to add the content descriptors to its ratings.

The ratings are designed to work in conjunction with the V-chip device, which will be available in half of all new TV sets starting in January, 1999, and in all new sets by the following year. Using the V-chip, parents will be able to block programs with certain ratings from their home. In addition, the ratings are displayed on-screen for fifteen seconds at the start of each program, and are printed in some TV listings.

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The Research Project: A Content Analysis of the TV Rating System

The purpose of this study is to explore how effectively the new TV rating system has been applied during its first year in operation. In particular, the study examines whether the ratings assigned to shows accurately reflect their content, according to the guidelines developed by the industry.

The Kaiser Family Foundation takes no position on the television rating system. The Foundation commissioned this study to provide objective data to parents, policymakers and decision-makers in the television industry. The study was conducted as part of the Foundation's Program on the Entertainment Media & Public Health, which was established to examine the impact of entertainment media in society, and to work with the entertainment industry, researchers and policymakers on important public health issues.

This study is one of the largest analyses of television content ever conducted. It is designed to meet the most rigorous academic standards for scientific research. In conducting the study, a randomly-selected composite week of television programming on eleven channels was subjected to elaborate content analysis. The eleven channels include network and independent broadcast stations as well as basic and premium cable channels. In addition, a three week over-sample of prime-time programming on the major broadcast networks was analyzed to provide a closer look at the most highly viewed television shows.

Unlike some studies of television content, this analysis does not simply "count" the number of violent or sexual acts in a show, but rather takes account of both the varying degrees of intensity of the depictions, and the context in which they are shown.

For example, in measuring the amount and nature of violent content in television shows, the study not only counted the percent of programs that contain violence and the average number of violent scenes in each of these shows, but also analyzed the level and intensity of the violence. The "level" of violence was calculated based on the type of violent action depicted and the extent of violent acts in each scene; the "intensity" of the violence was calculated based on the seriousness of harm to the victim, the graphicness of the action depicted, and the degree of blood and gore shown.

Similar measures were used to evaluate the levels and explicitness of sexual behavior, sexual dialogue and adult language in all shows analyzed for this study. The analyses were conducted by trained coders who were monitored statistically to verify that a high degree of consistency in judgments across coders was maintained.

Key Findings

TV-Y
TV-Y7
TV-G
TV-PG
TV-14
TV-MA
TV-Y
TV-Y7
TV-G
TV-PG
TV-14

Key Findings

1. **The age-based ratings for general audience shows (i.e., all shows except children's programs) are applied in a way that reasonably reflects the content of those shows.**

On average, the amount, level and intensity of the content in programs rated TV-G, TV-PG and TV-14 fell largely within the bounds of the definitions of those ratings as provided in the guidelines.

For example, the TV-G rating is defined as indicating a program with "little or no" violence, sexual situations, or sexual dialogue, and "no" strong language.

Eight out of ten (80%) TV-G shows contained no violence at all. Twenty percent of shows rated TV-G *did* contain violence, averaging two violent scenes per show, with a level and intensity of violence evaluated as "low."

Nine out of ten (91%) TV-G shows contained no sexual behavior. Nine percent of shows rated TV-G *did* contain sexual situations, averaging 1.4 sexual scenes per show, mostly consisting of physical flirting, with some intimate touch or passionate kissing.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of all TV-G shows had no sexual dialogue at all. Twenty-eight percent of shows rated TV-G *did* contain sexual dialogue, averaging 2.1 scenes per show featuring talk about sex, with a "moderate" level of emphasis in the scenes.

Eight out of ten (80%) TV-G shows had no adult language at all. Twenty percent of shows rated TV-G *did* contain some adult language. Almost all instances consisted of mild words, although several programs used words such as "bitch" and "shit."

Summary of Sensitive Content by Rating Category...

TV-G Shows

Percent of TV-G shows that contain		*Average number of scenes per show*	*Average level within scenes*	*Percent of TV-G shows that received*	
Violence	20%	2.0	Low level and intensity	V	0%*
Sexual Behavior	9%	1.4	Low level & no explicitness	S	0%*
Sexual Dialogue	28%	2.1	Moderate level of emphasis	D	0%*
Adult Language	20%	2.1	Low level of language	L	0%*

TV-PG Shows

Percent of TV-PG shows that contain		*Average number of scenes per show*	*Average level within scenes*	*Percent of TV-PG shows that received*	
Violence	55%	5.2	Moderate level and intensity	V	13%
Sexual Behavior	28%	2.0	Moderate level & low explicitness	S	2%
Sexual Dialogue	68%	3.8	Moderate level of emphasis	D	16%
Adult Language	66%	3.5	Low level of language	L	6%

TV-14 Shows

Percent of TV-14 shows that contain		*Average number of scenes per show*	*Average level within scenes*	*Percent of TV-14 shows that received*	
Violence	70%	6.9	Moderate level and intensity	V	29%
Sexual Behavior	56%	2.4	Moderate level & low explicitness	S	12%
Sexual Dialogue	82%	4.9	Moderate level of emphasis	D	34%
Adult Language	78%	5.5	Low level of language	L	15%

*The rating guidelines make no mention of using content descriptors with TV-G shows.

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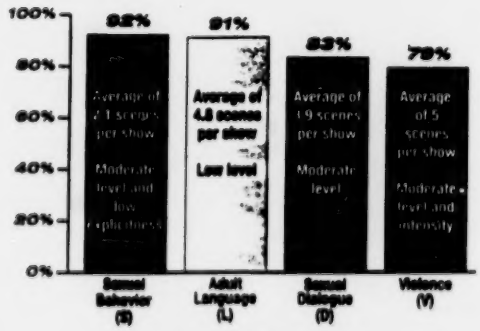
2. However, content descriptors are not being used on the vast majority of general audience shows containing sex, violence or adult language.

A significant amount of violence, sex and adult language is being aired in general audience programs unaccompanied by the relevant content descriptor. As a result, parents who wish to use the ratings to prevent their children from viewing content of this nature may not be aware that there is still a significant amount of "moderately intense" sex, violence and adult language in shows without content descriptors.

The failure to flag the majority of sex, violence and adult language with content descriptors is a result of several factors, including judgment calls by the industry, NBC's decision not to use the content descriptors at all, and the design of the system as described in the guidelines.

More than nine out of ten (92%) shows with sexual behavior did not receive an S content descriptor; these shows averaged two (2.1) scenes of "moderate" sexual behavior per show. In general, most of the sexual behavior in shows without an S consisted of acts such as passionate kissing, although many contained scenes in which sexual intercourse was depicted or implied. For example, in the Lifetime movie *Danielle Steele's Family Album*, rated TV-PG, a married man named Ward steals away for a trip to Mexico with his mistress. In one scene on the veranda, the two begin to kiss passionately and talk about how they excite one another. The woman says seductively "I'm going to do things to you you've never had done before," as they roll to the floor to begin making love. Two scenes later, Ward returns home to his wife and immediately engages her in a session of lovemaking. He undresses his wife in between passionate kisses. Then this couple is shown having intercourse in the bed, with the bedsheets covering them from the waist down.

Percent of shows with sex, violence, or adult language that did NOT receive a content descriptor...



***This chart includes all general audience (i.e. non-children's) shows that qualified for a rating.**

Nearly eight out of ten shows (79%) containing violence did not receive a V content descriptor; these shows averaged five scenes of "moderate" violence per show. On average, the amount, level and intensity of violence in shows that did *not* receive a V content descriptor was substantially lower than in those shows that *did* receive a V, but this was often not the case. For example, an episode of *Walker, Texas Ranger* that did not receive a V included the stabbing of two guards on a bus, an assault on a church by escaped convicts who take a group of people hostage and threaten to rape a nun, and an episode-ending fight scene in which one escapee is shot and another is beaten unconscious with punches and kicks.

More than eight out of ten (83%) shows with sexual dialogue did not receive a D content descriptor; these shows averaged nearly four (3.9) scenes of "moderate" sexual dialogue per show. For example, in one episode of *Beverly Hills 90210*, which did not receive a D, a woman plays a tape of her boyfriend and his new lover discussing how they felt when they had sex together.

Nine out of ten (91%) shows with adult language did not receive an L content descriptor; these shows averaged more than four (4.8) scenes per show with adult language.

Reasons why most violence, sex and adult language in general audience programs does not receive a content descriptor:

As mentioned above, there are a number of reasons why most of the violence, sex and adult language in general audience shows is being aired without content descriptors. This section reviews those reasons, and using violence as an example, indicates how much of the unlabeled content is attributable to each reason.

NBC does not use content descriptors: NBC has declined to use content descriptors on any of its programming. Any sex, violence or adult language on that network, however intense, does not receive a content descriptor. *Seven percent of the unlabeled violence was found in shows on NBC.*

TV-G programs are not given content descriptors: The rating guidelines do not make reference to the use of content descriptors in conjunction with shows rated TV-G, and no shows that were rated TV-G received any content descriptors. *Seventeen percent of the unlabeled violence was found in TV-G shows.*

Not all sensitive content in TV-PG and TV-14 shows receives a content descriptor: In some cases, the study identified TV-PG or TV-14 programs that contained substantial sex, violence or adult language, but did not receive the relevant content descriptor, even though the guidelines seem to indicate that one should have been given. For example, in network prime-time programming, TV-14 shows that contained violence but did *not* receive a V content descriptor had an average of more than six (6.4) violent scenes per show, most of it at the same level and intensity of violence as in those TV-14 shows that *did* receive a V content descriptor.

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In other cases, the rating guidelines themselves appear to allow some sex, violence or adult language in TV-PG or TV-14 programs to go unlabeled. For example, the guidelines for TV-14 shows indicate that such shows will receive a V descriptor if they contain violence that is judged by the broadcaster to be "intense," but they make no mention of applying a V if the show contains "moderate" violence. Similarly, the guidelines only discuss applying a V to TV-PG shows if the violence is judged "moderate." This practice limits the V-chip system's ability to consistently identify violence with a V. *Fifty-five percent of the unlabeled violence was found in non-NBC shows rated TV-PG or TV-14.*

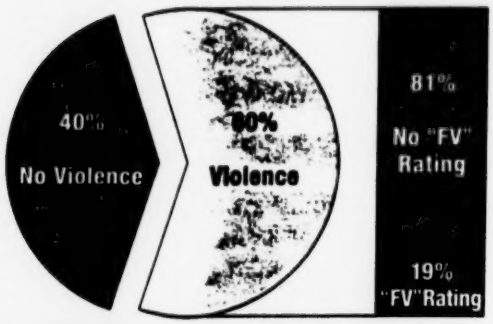
Movies can be shown with MPAA ratings: According to the rating guidelines, premium cable stations that air uncut movies may use the MPAA ratings instead of the ratings designed specifically for TV. HBO generally chooses this option. Accordingly, movies that contain violence on HBO may receive a PG-13 or an R rating, but do not have a V content descriptor. While that network has developed its own parental warnings that may be applied to such movies, these warnings will not work in conjunction with the V-chip. *Seventeen percent of the unlabeled violence was found in MPAA-rated movies.*

Some shows that are supposed to be rated don't receive any ratings at all: A small portion (4%) of non-news or sports shows that were supposed to receive ratings did not receive them, and these unrated shows often contained violence, sex or adult language. *Four percent of the unlabeled violence was found in unrated programs.*

Whatever the reasons, the bottom line for parents who want to use the V-chip ratings to guide their children's viewing is clear. Parents cannot rely on the content descriptors, as currently employed, to block all shows containing adult language, violence or sexual content. While most of the unlabeled content was milder than that found in shows with content descriptors, there is still a significant amount of "moderate" to "high" level sex and violence in shows without content descriptors.

Percent of children's programs containing violence...

Of children's programs containing violence, the percent that receive the content descriptor "FV" for "fantasy violence"...



3. Children's programs also contain a significant amount of violence, most of which is not indicated by an FV ("fantasy violence") content descriptor.

Six out of every ten shows designed for children contain violence, averaging more than five scenes of violence per show.

TV-Y More than half (55%) of children's shows rated TV-Y contain violence, and these shows have an average of 5.7 violent scenes per show. The level and intensity of the violence in TV-Y programs is, on average, "low," but this is not always the case. For example, one TV-Y episode of *Spiderman* reviewed for this study contained an extended battle scene between Spiderman and an enemy, which included extensive firing from machine guns and tanks, with Spiderman being repeatedly shot at and pummeled by his opponent.

TV-Y7 Three out of four (76%) children's shows rated TV-Y7 contain violence, with an average of more than five violent scenes per show. The violence in TV-Y7 shows was of a "moderate" level and intensity.

PBS Children's shows on PBS were analyzed independently of those on the commercial stations. All but one of the PBS children's programs analyzed for this study were rated TV-Y. Fourteen percent of these shows contained violence, compared to 55% of TV-Y programs industry-wide. Those children's shows on PBS that did contain violence had an average of fewer than half as many violent scenes as other channels.

Eight out of ten (81%) children's shows containing violence do not receive an FV content descriptor.

The rating guidelines do not require that all children's shows containing violence be flagged with the FV content descriptor (indicating "fantasy violence").

For example, the guidelines make no mention of using the FV content descriptor on shows rated TV-Y. Instead, the guidelines simply state that shows rated TV-Y are supposed to be specifically designed for a very young audience, including children as young as two, and are not expected to frighten younger children. Yet many shows that have been rated TV-Y do contain violence, none of which receive the FV designation.

In addition, for the rating TV-Y7, the guidelines call for the FV descriptor to be used only on shows "where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category."

The way the FV content descriptor is applied now, it does not reliably tell parents whether there is violence in a children's program or not. Again, the bottom line for parents who want to use the V-chip ratings to guide their children's viewing is clear: there is no effective way for parents to block out all children's shows containing violence.

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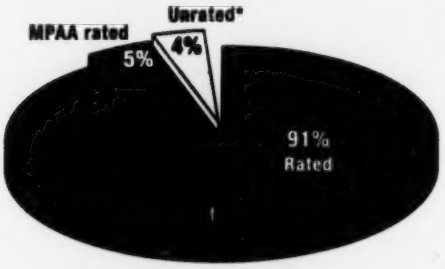
The Television Ratings Landscape:

Assigning a rating to non-exempt shows

Under the rating system, all shows other than news or sports are supposed to receive a rating. **Across all networks and programs reviewed in 1998, only 4% of shows that qualified for a rating failed to receive one.** The commercial broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox) failed to rate 7% of shows that qualified for a rating. Shows broadcast on PBS were analyzed independently of the commercial stations in this study; on PBS, 48% of all shows that qualified for a rating did not receive one.

Percent of all non-exempt TV shows that received a rating...



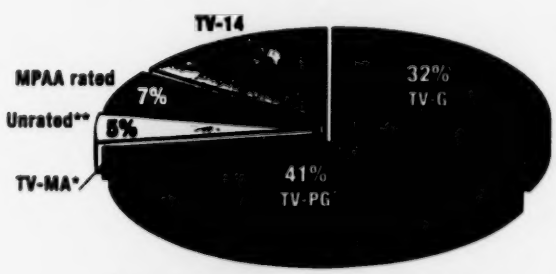
*These programs were unrated, but according to the guidelines, should have been rated.

Use of age-based ratings

Among programming designed for a general audience (i.e., all shows except children's programs), the most commonly used ratings are TV-PG and TV-G. The TV-MA rating is virtually unused. Forty-one percent of non-exempt general audience shows were rated TV-PG, 32% received a TV-G, and 15% received a TV-14. The rating TV-MA was applied to only .2% of shows. The remainder of programs were either not rated, or were given an MPAA movie rating.

In a closer look at prime-time programming on the four commercial broadcast networks, the study found that 56% of non-exempt shows received a TV-PG, 25% received a TV-14, 19% a TV-G, and none received a rating of TV-MA.

Breakdown of age-based ratings among general audience shows...



*Accounts for .2 percent
**These programs were unrated, but according to the guidelines, should have been rated.

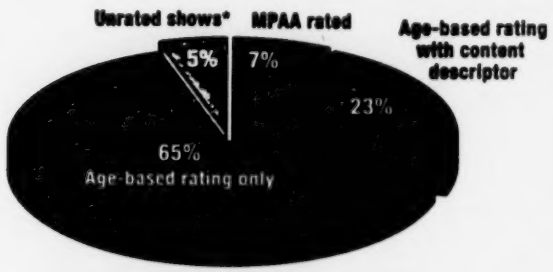
Use of content descriptors

The rating system provides for content descriptors (V for violence, S for sexual behavior, D for sexual dialogue, L for adult language, and FV for fantasy violence in children's programs) to be applied to some shows that contain sensitive content. The study analyzed what proportion of shows that qualify for an age-based rating also received a content descriptor.

Among children's programs, 11% received a content descriptor. Among general audience programs, 23% received a content descriptor. Excluding NBC, which has specifically declined to use the content descriptors, 25% of all general audience shows included any content descriptor. No programs on PBS received a content descriptor (these programs were analyzed independently of those on the commercial stations). Shows broadcast on the four major networks during prime-time received a content descriptor 36% of the time. Excluding NBC, prime time network shows received a content descriptor half the time (51%).

The most frequently used content descriptor on general audience shows was the rating D (sexual dialogue), which was applied to 12% of non-exempt shows, followed by V (violence) at 10%, L (adult language) at 5% and S (sex) at 3%. In prime-time programming on the major networks, V was the most commonly used content descriptor, applied to 18% of non-exempt shows; L was applied to 16%, D to 13% and S to 4% of non-exempt programs.

The use of age-based ratings and content descriptors on general audience shows...



*These programs were unrated, but according to the guidelines, should have been rated.

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The TV Ratings

The TV Parental Guidelines, agreed to by the television industry and parent's organizations, are the only official descriptions of the various ratings and how they should be applied. Following is the exact text of these guidelines.

The following categories apply to programs designed solely for children:

All Children

This program is designed to be appropriate for all children. Whether animated or live-action, the themes and elements in this program are specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2-6. This program is not expected to frighten younger children.

Directed to Older Children

This program is designed for children age 7 and above. It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy violence or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children. Note: for those programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category, such programs will be designated TV-Y7-FV.

The following categories apply to programs designed for the entire audience:

General Audience

Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.

Parental Guidance Suggested

This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children. Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D).

Parents Strongly Cautioned

This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age. Parents are strongly urged to exercise greater care in monitoring this program and are cautioned against letting children under the age of 14 watch unattended. This program contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L), or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).

Mature Audience Only

This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L).

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Ratings

Methodology:

More than 2600 randomly-selected television programs were examined for this study across two television seasons. For both the 1996-97 and the 1997-98 seasons, a composite week of programming from 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 p.m. was taped and analyzed, along with an over-sample of two additional weeks of prime-time programming on the commercial broadcast networks.

The findings reported in this executive summary are based exclusively on the 1997-98 sample, after the content descriptors had been added to the rating system. The channels included in the composite week sample include ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, HBO, Lifetime, Nickelodeon, TNT, and USA, along with the independent Los Angeles station KTLA (a WB affiliate, airing nine hours a week of WB programming). A one-week sample of programming on PBS was also analyzed and is reported independently of the commercial stations. The prime-time over-sample includes programs broadcast on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox.

After the sampling was completed, each television program that qualified for a rating (all programs except news and sports) was analyzed for portrayals of violence, sex and adult language. Intricate scales were developed to determine the level, and where appropriate, the intensity or explicitness of the content in the three areas. The content analysis of programming captured not only the amounts and types of violence, sex and language, but also the context of these portrayals.

The scientific integrity of the content analysis data reported in this research is established by careful statistical monitoring of the inter-coder reliability for all judgments, which is presented in detail in the complete report.

For a full explanation of the methods used in this study, please refer to the full report, publication #1434, which is available for free online at: www.kff.org, or by calling 1-800-656-4533.

Kaiser Family Foundation:

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. This study was conducted as part of the Foundation's Program on the Entertainment Media & Public Health, which was established to examine the impact of entertainment media in society, and to work with the entertainment industry, researchers and policymakers on important public health issues.

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